

Bogaerts: USA TODAY Sports' Minor League Player of Year

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Xander Bogaerts was 17 when he and his twin brother, Jair, were sent to the Dominican Summer League in 2010, new Boston Red Sox prospects learning Spanish and being away from their family for the first time yet facing the biggest test of their young careers.

The next year, the previously inseparable twins had to split up as Xander advanced to low-Class A ball in Greenville, S.C., virtually another world from his hometown of San Nicolas, Aruba.

Through every minor league stop in a quick ascent that saw him land in the majors in mid-August, Bogaerts handled the challenge of being surrounded by older players with a quiet confidence and remarkable poise, registering an on-base-plus-slugging percentage (OPS) of at least .815 at every level.

With that precociousness in mind, the Red Sox took the rare step of thrusting a 20-year-old rookie shortstop into the middle of a playoff race. Bogaerts is the third-youngest player in the majors, 15 days older than the Washington Nationals' Bryce Harper and about five months older than the Texas Rangers' Jurickson Profar. Bogaerts also is Boston's first position player age 20 or younger since outfielder Dwight Evans in 1972.

"Knowing the talent and the ability he was showing in Triple-A and knowing the makeup, we felt pretty good about it," Red Sox director of player development Ben Crockett says of calling up the highly touted prospect to play a backup role as Boston tries to hold on to the American League East lead.

"He brings a maturity beyond his years that allows him to operate in these environments where he's the youngest player or one of the youngest."

Bogaerts batted a combined .297 with 15 home runs, 67 RBI and a .865 OPS between Class AA and AAA, made his major league debut Aug. 20 and got his first big-league hit four days later.

The fast climb to the majors, his standout season and obvious tools made Bogaerts' the logical choice as USA TODAY Sports' Minor League Player of the Year, following 2012 winner Wil Myers and 2011 honoree Paul Goldschmidt.

Bogaerts was thrilled when he heard of the award, but he also pondered whether he would have progressed quicker in a different setting.

As a youngster in Aruba, he was happy for the chance to play baseball on a barren field Saturdays and Sundays. He had school and other sports — basketball, soccer and volleyball — to keep him busy, plus baseball practice on weekdays. It wasn't until he was sent to the Dominican league that he got to play on a daily basis.

"I wonder if I would have been better if I played every day like in the U.S.," Bogaerts says. "And the quality is not the same. We never had a guy who threw 90 (mph). Then I went to the Dominican Summer League and everybody was throwing hard, so I had to adjust really quick."

The ability to adjust has been one of Bogaerts' strong suits and will prove a necessity in the majors. It was on display when he played for the Netherlands team that made a surprising run to the semifinals of the World Baseball Classic in March.

The Dutch team had five shortstops, so manager Hensley Meulens tabbed the Atlanta Braves' Andrelton Simmons as his starter and shifted Bogaerts to third base, which he had never played.

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"He was very quick to adjust and pick it up," Meulens says. "It only took him a couple of days to get comfortable over there. You could see the athleticism was the reason why."

Staying at shortstop?

At 6-3 and 185 pounds, Bogaerts has above-average power and arm strength, plus a pretty good notion of what he's doing at the plate (63 walks, 95 strikeouts this season in the minors).

He's more advanced offensively than with the glove, but his superior athleticism and work ethic have allowed him to make major progress defensively. Crockett says now it's a matter of polishing his fielding skills through repetition and experience.

"If you saw the way I started compared to now, I would probably give myself a few Gold Gloves (by comparison)," Bogaerts says, laughing. "I was really bad. So if I can get from there to here and make so much improvement, imagine from now to a few years down the road."

Scouts have raised the question of whether Bogaerts' long-term future will be at shortstop. With his size and 30-home run potential, he could slide over to third base — where the Red Sox have used him a few times — or convert to the outfield.

At one point or another, such suggestions have been made in the past about big shortstops including Cal Ripken Jr., Troy Tulowitzki and Hanley Ramirez, who is Bogaerts' favorite player and the last Red Sox prospect to exhibit the same kind of five-tool package at such an early age.

But offensive performers who can play a prime position such as shortstop are rare and extremely valuable, and Red Sox second baseman Dustin Pedroia is among those who think size should not be an issue.

"He's a great athlete. He moves well. He's quick. He's got a ton of ability," Pedroia says of Bogaerts. "I didn't know there was a height and weight requirement. I didn't know it was like a Disney ride: 'You have to be this tall to play this position.'"

"Troy Tulowitzki is 6-5 (actually 6-3) and he's the best defensive shortstop in the big leagues. It doesn't matter."

Bogaerts is the first player from Aruba to play for the Red Sox and the fifth overall to reach the majors. Baseball in Aruba is not as developed as in neighboring Curacao, a fellow former Dutch Antille that has produced Andruw Jones, Randall Simon, Kenley Jansen, Jair Jurrjens, Meulens, Simmons and Profar, among others.

"In Aruba we don't have stadiums with grass," said Bogaerts, who was used to playing on rocky fields. "A few years back they made one of artificial turf. That's the only one we have."

The Bogaerts brothers learned the game under the tutelage of their uncle Glenroy Brown, who became a father figure when they were about 2 after their parents split up.

Even though their father, Jan Bogaerts, moved away to pursue business interests in Hong Kong — Xander Bogaerts said he hadn't seen him in years — the twins and older sister Chandra grew up in a stable environment.

Their mother, Sandra Brown, a social worker who deals with domestic violence issues, kept the family grounded with help from Glenroy. Bogaerts credits her for the poise and maturity that characterize him.

"It's a great Christian family. They're really solid," says Mike Lord, the former Red Sox scout who signed both brothers on the same day, Xander for a \$410,000 bonus and Jair for \$180,000.

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Transitional times

Lord says the family was more intent on getting the right opportunity than on pushing for every last dollar, but they wanted both brothers to go pro. With Xander the much better prospect, Lord signed them as a package deal.

"You can tell they're best friends," Lord says. "I knew Jair was going to be a long shot, but it was worth taking a chance. And these guys are inseparable, so it was going to be a lot easier to sign both of them."

Jair, a catcher and first baseman, played two seasons in the DSL and was traded to the Chicago Cubs in March 2012 to complete the compensation package for general manager Theo Epstein. The Cubs released him that summer, and he's working on becoming an agent.

Under the educational system in the island, which is patterned after the Dutch, the baseball-loving brothers learned English and Dutch, besides growing up with the local Papiamentu, a mix of Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish and African languages.

Spanish also was taught in school, but Xander Bogaerts says he didn't apply himself much until getting to the Dominican league, where speaking the language is essential. He became fluent enough that he frequently translated for several Latino teammates while in the minors.

Though Bogaerts said going from his native island of 100,000 people to the USA did not result in culture shock, the increase in the number of games represented a major transition. Meulens knows from his experience in Curacao, where he didn't play more than 25 games in a season.

"You get here, and all of a sudden you're playing in rookie ball 60 or 70 games in the sun every day, that takes a toll on you," Meulens says. "Then you move on to full season the following year, and that's 144 games. So they need two or three years to get used to playing more games, playing every day, while they refine their skills."

Bogaerts refined them so quickly he reached the majors at the end of his third season in the USA. He batted .260 at Greenville, then hit at least .284 everywhere he went on the way up, belting no fewer than 15 homers every year.

"I'm a slow starter," Bogaerts says, "but once I get accustomed to everything, I feel good and take off."

Ortiz reported from San Francisco